

More than 100,000 protest in Athens

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More than 100,000 workers demonstrated in Athens outside the parliament yesterday to protest the PASOK government's latest austerity measures. The protest was held on the second day of a 48-hour general strike by millions of workers.

The leaders of the two main trade union federations, the GSEE and Adedy, arrived in Syntagma Square in the morning and left only minutes later.

Before the official start of the protest, several thousand members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE) affiliated trade union, the All Workers Militant Front (PAME), established themselves in the square as a self-proclaimed security force to "defend the public" from what they termed as provocateurs and "anarcho-fascists." The PAME members, armed with baseball bats and carrying motorcycle helmets, lined up in front of the massed riot police in several lines, as a second rank protecting the parliament building.

Later in the afternoon, groups of hooded and masked youth threw missiles, bricks and petrol bombs, at the parliament building and the PAME members, which led to clashes in which 40 were injured.

This violence was used as a pretext by the riot police to begin launching tear gas into the crowd. The full force of the state was mobilized as some 15,000 riot police later dispersed the protesters from the square and chased groups through the streets of Athens.

Later a 55-year-old worker died in a Greek hospital, with the circumstances of his death subject to speculation. It was reported that he had not died at the demonstration, but of a heart attack in hospital.

It was apparent as protesters gathered in the square during the morning that they believed the police would be mobilized against them. With the air still thick with tear gas from the previous day, many arrived wearing surgical face masks. Those who did not have a mask were provided with tissues and face cream, as well as being directed to one of the various vendors around the

square who were selling face masks for one euro each—a sign that vicious attacks by the forces of the state are now part of everyday life.

A delegation of refuse workers was in attendance, now 17 days into a strike and faced with prison sentences if they continue. One of the workers, Gregoris, said that the strike could "last forever", and he saw "no reason to go back to work." "For the whole of this month I was paid only €100 and I have a little kid," he said.

Manolis said that he and his colleagues were living in abject poverty due to the cuts. He took €16 from his pocket and said, "That is all I have left to last me until the end of this month."

Alexis said, "I have been a street cleaner for 23 years and these are the worst conditions I have ever seen. Today every street cleaner in Greece is out on strike."

The government has begun issuing Civil Mobilisation Orders against the strikers in the last few days in an effort to force them back to work. When asked about these dictatorial methods, Gregoris said that the workers would continue their struggle. "The government wants to stop our strike and every other strike, but our job now is to strike. We won't have money to eat and I have a family you understand. On this kind of money there is no future.

"We have had a lot of support because everybody is affected. I am 37 years old and this is the biggest strike I have ever seen. My friend here is older and it is the biggest strike he has seen too."

Over the past weeks, workers in Athens and throughout Greece have occupied government finance ministries and municipal offices. Overlooking Syntagma Square is the Ministry of Finance, which has been under occupation for the past two weeks. A large banner reading "OCCUPIED" was draped from the ministry roof.

Nana, 55, works at the ministry. In the last several

years her salary has been cut by 50 percent to €1,000 per month. She has two children and has to pay high interest rates for a mortgage. Along with her huge pay cut, her future pension is also being slashed to only €500 a month.

Fotini also works for the Ministry of Finance and her monthly salary has been cut from €1,700 to €900. She explained she was in this situation even though she spoke several languages and had two master degrees. “It is not about a wealthy life, it is about dignity. A lot of my friends have also lost their jobs and have no perspective for a future in Greece.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters were told many similar stories.

Jenny is employed by a public service organisation that provides medical services to drug addicts and funded by the Health Ministry. The government has stopped funding the service. “We won't have money to get paid and our department won't even be able to pay the telephone bills and the electricity bill,” she said. “The government doesn't care about the workers but about the banks. None of those who caused this crisis are being punished, only the people.”

Many spoke with anger about the devastating social attacks on the Greek working class. We were repeatedly told that, “We cannot live like this any longer.”

Despite their determination, many were not convinced that the protest would have any effect. This is largely thanks to the trade unions, which have worked hand in glove with the government, and the role of the pseudo-left coalitions, Syriza and Antarsya, which have dragooned workers behind the trade unions and prevented a political struggle to bring down PASOK.

On the demonstration not a single political group put the social attacks into a European and international framework. Instead they demanded Greece withdraw from the euro and revert to the drachma. One PAME representative told a reporter that all the problems of the Greek people began 22 years ago with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty.

“On this demonstration you don't see the leaders of the trade unions,” Fotini said. “We are here not for these leaders but because we are workers and we have to fight for our rights.”

Other workers told the WSWS that the unions were

not seriously fighting the austerity measures.

“The workers want to fight, but the unions hold them back,” said Nikos, a drug prevention social worker. “What is definitely important is that workers of all European countries work together and break with the old leaders. It is impossible to give capitalism a human face today. This is over. We need a society that is based on the needs of the people.”

Nikos said he considered the crisis as the dying breath of the capitalist system. “If the workers are not able to give an answer to this, the right-wing forces could come to power and establish military rule again,” he stated.

He said he would read the WSWS and concluded by saying he would like to make a specific statement for WSWS readers: “The money that Greece is to get from the banks is money that is first stolen from the European workers, then given to the government and then it is transferred to the European banks. It does not go into the pocket of the Greece workers.”



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